

EIGHTEENTH:
THE JEWISH ETHICAL TRADITION AND THE SHARPS' WITNESS

**A sermon given during the Days of Awe
by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason at
UU Wellesley Hills on September 16th, 2018**

As every liturgical calendar does, the Jewish year calls on us to mark the time and also to notice the ways that time may be leaving its mark on us. Those familiar with the High Holy Days know the arc of Days of Awe, starting with Rosh Hoshanah celebrations of the New Year, and concluding with the Yom Kippur fast on the Day of Atonement. To usher in a new era, we have to conclude the old. We have to make peace with our past and with all those who populate it, too.

As I settle into my ministry at UU Wellesley Hills, I become better acquainted with its proud history. Looming large in memory are - of course - the Sharps, who resided with their two children in the Wellesley Hills parsonage for nearly a decade. The Rev. Waitstill Sharp was called here in 1936, as Nazi Germany was beginning its annexation of European territory and America was still caught in the Great Depression. His wife Martha, a social worker, joined him.

During the Sharps' tenure from 1936 through 1944, they were away from Wellesley for two substantial stints, coordinating foreign missions in 1939 and 1940, laying foundations for the organization that would later become the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. While they were gone, friends here cared for their young children and area ministers supplied its pulpit.

In the 2016 history he wrote about this church titled Lives that Speak and Deeds That Beckon, our Minister Emeritus, the Rev. Dr. John Hay Nichols asked: “What did it take for a congregation to give up its minister to an unsettled situation in Europe on the brink of war?” He notes that “[f]or those who realized even part of what was happening or going to happen, it took a great deal of courage.” Of course, not everyone did realize what was happening abroad. Not everyone understood the extent of Hitler’s plan to systematically target and finally exterminate all of European Jewry.

The event now known as Kristallnacht raised international alarm, as German Jews were given a brief period of time in which they could emigrate from German-occupied lands. American Unitarians had a network in place in Czechoslovakia which could assist them with emigration, but they needed personnel there to make it possible. So the Sharps were recruited.

The Sharps were not the Unitarians’ first choice, or even in their top seven, apparently. The Sharps were eighteenth on the list. It is a dark backdrop, this grim recognition that seventeen other candidates did not fully grasp the urgency of the humanitarian crisis, or would not be persuaded of it. The Sharps were. Even if they did not have the full confidence of the American Unitarian Association, being eighteenth in line, they shared a conviction it was a time for drastic action.

In Judaism, the number 18 actually carries sacred significance. It is correlated with the Hebrew “chai”, a word that translates as “life”, the highest good in the Jewish ethical tradition. Jewish mystics assign the numerological value 18 to chai, so 18 itself is considered lucky, or “life-giving”. For this reason, Jews will often make donations or gifts in denominations of 18. At the time, I doubt being eighteenth carried this particular association for the Sharps. But they both

decided to devote their lives to this cause, and UU Wellesley Hills endorsed their choice.

In her annual report to the congregation, the then-chair of the Standing Committee wrote that the Sharps' first departure, a seven-month leave, represented "a distinct sacrifice - it could not be otherwise... But with this sense of sacrifice is also the consciousness that our little church is through its minister and his wife helping perhaps... to perform a great humanitarian service to a tragically broken people." A second departure soon followed their first.

Over the course of their two missions to Nazi-occupied Europe, the Sharps were able to assist hundreds escaping to safety, but these trips only served to amplify their sense of the scale of the brokenness, the senseless cruelty and relentless lethality of the Third Reich. They found it difficult to communicate the terrifying enormity of this to their fellow Americans, who remained isolationist even then. America did not join the war effort until 1941, after the Sharps' missions were completed.

The book Defying the Nazis: The Sharps' War, researched and written by the couple's grandson Artemis Joukowsky, reports that although she was the reluctant partner at the outset, Martha was also the spouse most reluctant to conclude their relief work, knowing the number of lives that remained at risk.

Just as it had been difficult for her to leave their young children behind for months at a time, Martha found it difficult to leave the Jewish children who had been surrendered by their own parents. After her return home, she worked tirelessly at her speaking engagements, raising awareness and funds. But it proved hard to accept, this idea that her tours of duty were over and done. Rather, it seemed to her family that they never quite ended.

The prayer from Gates of Repentance that was our call to worship this morning contains such a poignant petition: “O Source of Peace, lead us to peace, a peace profound and true; lead us to a healing, to mastery of all that drives us to war within ourselves and with others.” Peace within and peace without both prove so elusive to people, so rare in human history - but both persist as spiritual ideals.

What these Days of Awe in the Jewish calendar are meant to do is slow the heady rush of time just long enough to call our attention to the ways we ourselves inhabit it. To borrow the line from that favorite hymn Nichols quotes, we all hope to lead “lives that speak” to the best within us and to perform “deeds that beckon” us onto greater possibilities. The challenge lies in reconciling ourselves to routinely failing in these respects - because we will most certainly fail at times.

The call to repentance invites us to recognize our failures openly. At its most evolved, it is meant to spare us shame, not compound it. When we repent, we are not supposed to demean or belittle or humiliate ourselves. We are supposed to name our regrets and our shortcomings as honestly as possible. Too often, repentance is misconstrued. People believe it present them with the stark question: “Am I good person or a bad person?” This is a false dichotomy, an extreme binary; it actually limits our ability to repent of our choices.

A capacity for repentance is one of our chief human endowments, but it needs to be developed, and one of its prerequisites is a capacity for self-reflection, a willingness to see ourselves in our own place and time. We always exist in the context of relationships. Another prerequisite is a healthy capacity for lamentation, an ability to brook the brokenness of the human condition and the scope of suffering that continuously surrounds us - without cynicism or

indignation or despair. Sometimes the sins we most need to atone for are not even our own.

My guess is that the Sharps' did not give too much thought to the seventeen couples ahead of them on that list who refused to do the relief work in 1939, or ponder why the work should finally fall to them. They set out to do it, overlooking considerable personal costs. They risked their lives going to Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia and barely escaped with them. The Unitarian minister they worked with most closely while they were there, the Rev. Norbert Capek, led the largest Unitarian congregation in the world at the time. He was later arrested by the Gestapo. Like millions in World War II, he died in a concentration camp.

By the time the American Unitarians were ready to stage a second European mission based in Portugal, the Sharps' names appeared at the very top of their list. Their bravery was universally regarded. While it seems unfair that they were asked to go overseas once more, the Sharps accepted the repeated call and considered it a moral duty. Their daughter later said her parents were "modest and thoughtful people who responded to the suffering and needs of those around them, as they would have expected everyone to do in a similar situation." Today, of course, we see how extraordinary their responses were.

Frankly, most of our moral choices are made in already crowded fields. Usually, very many people have made their decisions before we are asked to make ours. People have refused difficult assignments, perhaps, or made cheap pacts for political expediency, or scapegoated entire populations, or colluded with oppressive powers. Their choices will limit our available options, and our present reality will impose its constraints. But the Jewish ethical tradition reminds us that we are all moral agents nonetheless.

When we consider our individual lives in the Days of Awe, we are not asked to evaluate whether we ourselves are good or bad people. We are asked to account for what we wish we had done differently and where we can commit ourselves to doing better still. We seek forgiveness for an imperfect past in order that we can turn toward a shared future that holds more promise for us all.

“May our deeds inscribe us in the Book of Life and blessing, righteousness, and peace!” the rabbis proclaim in the Gates of Repentance. The Book of Life is always being written, with each of us a contributing author. Its story is not ours alone, and it is not always ours to tell. How humbling it is to acknowledge that!

In his book about his grandparents, Joukowsky speculates that the second relief mission introduced a strain on Martha and Waitsill’s relationship that ultimately ended their marriage. Repeated absences resulted in the children feeling estranged from Martha well into their adult years. When Waitstill returned to Wellesley Hills, he was restless with the pace of parish life after being in the international arena and departed his pastorate in 1944. So the congregation that encouraged him and his wife on their foreign missions was left looking for a new minister in wartime. Even heroism has its complications and plot twists.

The human drama unfolds; we are simply asked to play our special role in it as convincingly as possible, even if we were not the top choice for that and are in fact eighteenth on the list. We never know when we will be cued for our turn on the stage, either in a bit or starring part. Some of you have asked me how you will account for yourselves during this moment in our history, when there are thousands upon thousands of migrant children here in America that need to be delivered from illegal detention to safety. Several systemic failures brought us to this point and now we all face this national disgrace.

Today it feels as though we are waging a war for the soul of this country. “One can only manage a miracle every so often,” Martha once observed, “but a series of miracles can happen when many people become concerned and are willing to act at the right time”. We are witnesses to the plight of the disenfranchised within our own borders. How will our lives speak to theirs? When is our right time?

The Jewish ethical tradition teaches us that even in the midst of catastrophic failures, we can try to correct for them. We must try, if we heed the religious imperative. “Whoever saves one life,” the Talmud teaches us, “saves the world entire”. In 2006, Israel ceremonially counted the Sharps in their “Righteous Among the Nations” for their work rescuing Jews and other refugees. But they did not act alone. In his 1939 report to the Commission for Service, Waitstill emphasized effective “cooperation”, the power of joining with others in “a common cause” through an elaborate “orchestration of interests and abilities”.

Our church copy of that report sits in the display case right outside our Sanctuary, open to pages 10-11. Take a look at it before you leave UU Wellesley Hills today. In this same report, Waitstill noted: “Our mission had as much spiritual intent as material. We hope that it carried as full a spiritual result.” I believe it did then and I believe it does now. It reminds us of the force of sacrificial spirit, which calls us to make sacrifices - sometimes wittingly and sometimes unwittingly.

Even if our names are not engraved alongside the Sharps’ on those stone walls at the Garden of the Righteous in Israel, we can still make a significant difference in this world. Even if our names are never typeset in a national commission report, our names can be inscribed in the Book of Life and Blessing, year after year we pass here on earth.

Today we pause. We look back. We look ahead. We look within. The historical chapters we have finished can serve as prologue, perhaps a prologue as cautionary as it is inspiring. What an awesome opportunity life is! What an awesome responsibility. These Days of Awe make us acutely aware of the time, this time, our time. It matters very much how all of us mark it.